

Gender Equality Key to Growth

Gender equality is critical to economic growth.

That's the conclusion of the new World Bank report *Voice and Agency: Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity*.

The bank estimates that not giving women and girls access to education, ignoring sexual violence and condoning adolescent pregnancy are ways of disempowering women and girls and together can cost a country nearly 4 percent of its annual economy.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, a think tank, experts acknowledge that social norms have a role in limiting women. Yet, "what one group says is a cultural norm is not necessarily what all the groups will say is the social norm," said World Bank President Jim Kim. Further, he said, norms are often used as "a way of justifying very unequal power relations."

The report says the good news is that "social norms can and do change." It says governments and communities can kick-start that change by providing women and girls with life-skills training, sexual and reproductive health education, mentoring, wages equal to what men are paid and wages for traditionally unpaid work like caregiving.

"Removing constraints and unleashing women's full productive potential can yield enormous dividends that help make whole societies more resilient and more prosperous," the report states.

The report says that when women delay marriage past adolescence, they have greater educational achievement and longer life expectancies that benefit their children's health and education.

It also notes that the number of countries that recognize domestic violence as a crime has risen from close to zero in the mid-1970s to 76 today. "In countries with legislation against domestic violence, women's acceptance of wife beating is lower," it states.

It says that when more women are elected to office, "policy-making increasingly reflects the priorities of families and women." And it says that property ownership can enhance women's capacity to make decisions about their lives, increase their social status, amplify their voices about issues of interest in their communities and increase their bargaining power within households.

The report notes that progressive constitutions and legal reforms can support the transformation of social norms. It states that expanding economic opportunities for women "may be one of the most visible and game-changing events in the life of modern households and all communities."

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